

Visits to Dacre and Barton Churches, Summer 2107 Martin Joyce

This year's Summer Visits to Dacre and Barton had an ecclesiastical theme - an odd choice you might think for an Archaeological Society. But while both sites were certainly well-worth visiting for their architectural and historical interest they also had truly ancient foundations and in both cases archaeological techniques had had a role in interpreting these.

At St Anthony Church at Dacre, a turnout of over 30 were blessed with excellent weather, a coffee-and-biscuits welcome from the Church Council and a splendid impromptu lecture Rachel Newman of Oxford Archaeology North. Rachel had led a major dig at the site some years ago that had revealed fascinating evidence of the Celtic/Viking-era Christian monastic occupation that preceded the construction of the present church. This had long been suspected because fragments of decorative Viking stonework had turned up in various locations both within the church and in nearby properties but also, and uniquely, because of documentary references that appear to link Dacre with the 7th/8th century kingdoms that ruled the northern Border lands. Tantalisingly, however, Rachel described how the heavy stonework forming the monastic drains revealed by her trenches showed evidence of re-use from a still older phase of occupation - possibly Roman. We were also encouraged to ponder upon the origins of the four mysterious stone "bears" that occupy the four corners of the churchyard. Clearly there is a lot more to learn at Dacre.

At Barton Church, our luck with the weather had obviously run out, but a somewhat-depleted Apparch attendance was still royally-treated by our guide, Richard Gravil who had turned out in the rain from nearby Tirril. Richard had written an excellent guidebook for the church and knew its history and features inside out. Barton is an architectural gem where virtually nothing significant has changed since the early 14th Century. The present church was built during the reign of Stephen and Matilda in the early 12th century - but there are strong suggestions that it wasn't the first building here. The church sits on a low mound surrounded by a semi-circular wall. The hill-top fort at Dun Mallard is not far away (just behind Pooley Bridge) and the site is mid-way between the huge prehistoric monuments at Eamont Bridge and the necropolis sites at Moor Divock. Springs and a well lie adjacent to the site and it has been suggested that the building of the present church may have been prompted by an early medieval tradition of preaching and baptism by a Celtic mission, possibly connected with St Patrick or St Kentigern. It all made for a fascinating evening that left us lots to think about. Our thanks go to Richard Gravil for making us so welcome.

Martin Joyce